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## **Roman Soil and Roman Sound in Irish Hagiography**

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This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article accepted on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2018 for a special issue of the *Journal of Medieval History* on 'The Papacy and Communication in the Central Middle Ages'.

**Abstract:** Irish hagiography displays considerable interest in communication between Ireland and Rome, particularly as this featured saints, popes, and relics. While people and objects travel between the two places, there is also concern to circumvent the distance involved. This article discusses an episode of miraculous communication in the Irish Life of St Colmán Élo. Here messages and messengers travel from Rome, but time and space are also telescoped through aural and material means: the sound of the bell marking the death of Pope Gregory the Great and a gift from him of Roman soil to be spread on Colmán Élo's cemetery. The article considers how the two elements function within their hagiographical context to connect Rome and Ireland, and how these places shaped the account. The roles of bell and soil both draw on their associations in Ireland and relate to papal communication as this was experienced and imagined more widely.

**Keywords:** Rome; Ireland; Gregory the Great; Colmán Élo; hagiography; bells; soil; cemetery

Medieval Irish hagiography exhibits a sustained interest in Rome. Irish saints travel to the city, and bring back Roman relics. At the same time as recounting the movement of people and objects between Rome and Ireland, the Lives of the saints also display some concern to circumvent the distance between the two. In some cases, this is eclipsed through visions; in others, Roman relics substitute for Rome and render the journey there unnecessary. The papacy primarily plays a part in the form of the pope, most notably Gregory the Great (590-604), with whom several Irish saints are said to have had contact. Here too, there is a dimension of appropriation, with Irish ancestry being claimed for Gregory and his coffin travelling miraculously to Ireland. The present article examines an episode of miraculous communication between Rome and Ireland that involves Pope Gregory as both subject and sender. In the passage, messages and messengers travel from Rome, but time and space are also telescoped through aural and material means: the sound of a bell and a gift of soil. The article considers how these two non-verbal means of communication function within their hagiographical context, how this draws on their associations in Ireland, and how they relate to papal communication as this was experienced and imagined more widely. If the miracle offers an essentially Irish vision of papal communication, it also sheds light on a wider phenomenon of connecting papal Rome with other locations through the movement of soil, and helps to clarify the conventional communicatory potential of the bell by adapting and transcending it.

The episode in question is found in the Irish-language Life of St Colmán Élo (d. 610).<sup>1</sup> Although three versions of the Latin Life of the saint exist, which have been dated in their original forms to c.800, his Irish Life is known only from a single copy – an early seventeenth-century transcription by Mícheál Ó Cléirigh – and has not to my knowledge been dated.<sup>2</sup> The Irish Life alone recounts how Colmán Élo and his

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<sup>1</sup> *Bethada Náem nÉirenn: Lives of Irish Saints*, ed. Charles Plummer, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1: 173; 2: 166-7.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the Latin Lives have been edited: *Vita S. Colmani Abbatis de Land Elo in Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi*, ed. W.W. Heist (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1965), 209-24; *Vita Sancti Colmani*, in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Charles Plummer, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 1: 258-73. For the dating, see Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 318-34. The manuscript of the Irish Life is Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 2324-40, fols. 219r-26r; *Bethada Náem nÉirenn*, 1: xxxii-xxxiii. Mícheál Ó Cléirigh was a Franciscan historian who played a significant part in the project by the Irish college at Louvain to record historic Irish texts, including several collections of hagiographical material. On his hagiographical transcriptions, see *Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, his*

companions, when in Ireland, miraculously heard the bell marking the death of Pope Gregory the Great, who is said to have been the saint's tutor. At the same time, a gift from Gregory of 'seven sacks full of the soil of Rome' arrived. Those bringing the soil instructed Colmán Élo to 'shake it over the length and breadth of thy cemetery, and any one who is buried in it shall not see hell'.<sup>3</sup> These events have significant spatial implications. They do not simply involve the transmission of information and the transportation of objects from one location to another, but also bring about an elision of place. In a sense, the two locations are present at once. Not only do the men deliver a spoken message, but the distance between Rome and Ireland is momentarily eclipsed as the group hears the sounds of the city. Similarly, the gift brought by the messengers is not just from the city, but part of it, and when scattered over Irish ground the Roman soil creates a lasting salvific equivalence. The episode thus offers a particularly rich lens through which to consider different means of communication and their spatial connotations.

If the relationship between Rome and Ireland within the narrative is noteworthy, the contribution of these places to the characterisation of that relationship is also worth addressing. In other words, if the message in the Irish Life of St Colmán Élo comes from Rome, how far is it shaped by that and how far by the cultural milieu in which the Life was written? Here it may be helpful to think of the Life's place of composition and the locations it discusses as contributing to a respective weighting of Rome and Ireland present in communication between the two places more generally. Any act of communication involves at least two sides, with the potential for those conveying, receiving, and indeed relaying, the message to understand it differently. This potential is amplified when the participants are geographically or culturally distant. Yet while this can be seen to constitute a misunderstanding of the original communicator's intentions, it is also possible to conceive of communication as inherently made up of these combined perceptions. A message sent from Rome to Ireland would, from this perspective, always accrue additional meaning at its destination. Descriptions of communication themselves bring different points of view to bear, so an account of such

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*Associates and St Anthony's College, Louvain*, ed. Nollaig Ó Muraíle (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), esp. 43-75, 146-55; on his wider activities, see Bernadette Cunningham, *The Annals of the Four Masters: Irish History, Kingship and Society in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, 1: 173; 2: 166-7.

a message written in Rome would likely differ from one penned in Ireland. The Irish Life of St Colmán Élo offers a further complexity, since it represents a past moment of papal communication as this was imagined within the genre of hagiography. The resulting construct certainly owes more to the Irish imaginary than it does to Roman realities, and the article acknowledges this by considering the wider associations possessed by bells and soil in Ireland. Yet there is still a Roman element left; an imagined, miraculous message from Rome is not the same as one from a different location.

It remains to be asked, therefore, whether the episode can also be understood in relation to papal communication as this was carried out in practice. Given its uncertain date, the Irish Life of St Colmán Élo is not easy to relate to a particular historical context or moment in Irish relations with the papacy. The early medieval Latin Lives mention a vision of Gregory's death but not the papal gift of the earth or the sound of the bells.<sup>4</sup> As discussed below, these elements of the Irish Life can, however, be compared with other vernacular saints' lives dating from the twelfth century onwards. The twelfth century witnessed various forms of communication between the papacy and Ireland, including the appointment of Irish papal legates, one of whom visited Rome; the presence of a papal legation under Cardinal John Paparo at the Synod of Kells in 1152; and the reception of papal letters.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it has been observed that 'Irish churchmen appear to have been more eager to secure papal engagement for the Irish Church than the popes were to respond to their requests'.<sup>6</sup> Both written communication and the circulation of messengers between Rome and Ireland continued and intensified over the following centuries. More specifically, the contact with Rome represented in the Life may reflect a desire to articulate Irish orthodoxy vis-à-vis the Roman Church, a concern from the early Middle Ages into the early modern period.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Vita S. Colmani de Land Elo*, 215-16 (§20); *Vita Sancti Colmani*, 1: 264 (§15).

<sup>5</sup> Marie Therese Flanagan, *The Transformation of the Irish Church in the Twelfth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010), 4-6, 246-7. On these contacts, see also Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *The Irish Church, its Reform and the English Invasion* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 79-82, 89-96.

<sup>6</sup> Flanagan, *Transformation*, 246.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point. On this issue, see Damian Bracken, 'Rome and the Isles: Ireland, England and the rhetoric of orthodoxy', in *Anglo-Saxon/Irish Relations Before the Vikings*, eds. James Graham-Campbell and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 75-97; Salvador Ryan, "'Holding up a lamp to the sun": Hiberno-papal relations and the construction of Irish

However, while relations with Rome, as well as with the English Church and between ecclesiastical institutions, must have influenced the passage, it is not my intention to attempt a more precise contextualisation in terms of the realities of the Irish Church. Instead, I consider how the gift of soil and the sound of the bell find correspondences in papal communication as this was imagined and experienced more widely. By discussing a hagiographical representation of papal communication together with practices attested in other sources, I do not mean to imply that the Life should be valued in terms of the extent to which it corresponds to such practices. Rather, the juxtaposition offers a way of thinking about experiences of communication involving particular media, in which imagination and practice can illuminate each other. The following discussion therefore addresses soil and sound in turn, focusing on the ways in which they negotiated geographical distance within and beyond the Irish Life of St Colmán Élo.

### **Roman Soil**

In the Irish Life of St Colmán Élo, the sound of the bell and the gift of the soil take place more or less simultaneously. Here the latter will be addressed first because it locates the Life more distinctively within its hagiographical context. Although the episode raises issues of gift-giving, discussion will focus on the material itself, looking at how it was employed in other saints' lives and in later papal practices, before considering the broader associations of soil and sacred space in Ireland. While the Irish Life of St Colmán Élo is difficult to date, that of an eponymous saint indicates that the transportation of Roman soil to cemeteries in Ireland was imagined in the central Middle Ages. In the Middle Irish *Betha Colmáin maic Luacháin*, the saint is said to have made a pilgrimage to Rome with his namesakes, Colmán Élo and Colmán Comraire.<sup>8</sup> After Colmán mac Lúacháin has vowed to perform thirty fasts in Rome to obtain heaven not only for himself but also for those in his cemetery, he and his companions return to Ireland with 'the soil of Peter's tomb and of the tomb of every other apostle and of every great saint that is in Rome', including the 'soil of Gregory's grave'. The earth is carried away 'in loads', and Colmán subsequently takes the load of

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orthodoxy in John Lynch's *Cambrensis Eversus* (1662)', in *The Church on its Past*, eds. Peter D. Clarke and Charlotte Methuen (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 168-80.

<sup>8</sup> *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin: Life of Colmán Son of Lúachan*, ed. and trans. Kuno Meyer (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1911), 79-85 (§76-82).

seven men to the cemetery of Lann Mic Lúacháin, where it is ‘scattered in every direction ... so that it is a burial in the soil of Rome for each one who has been buried there from that onward’.<sup>9</sup> The Life is generally dated to the first half of the twelfth century, shortly after the discovery of the relics of the saint in 1122, recorded in the Annals of Ulster.<sup>10</sup> Pádraig Ó Riain, however, has suggested that it should be dated later on various grounds, including its likely dependence on a late-twelfth-century version of the *Martyrology of Oengus*.<sup>11</sup>

Features common to the lives of Colmán mac Lúacháin and Colmán Élo suggest that they are related. Not only do both deal with soil brought from Rome, but in both cases an attempt is made to steal it: in the former, Colmán’s mother takes a bag of the earth to her brothers’ kin, only to have the saint deny its efficacy away from Lann; in the latter, the family of Durrow only succeed in stealing some of the soil from outside the stone enclosure of the cemetery, but Colmán Élo prays that it might have ‘the virtue of the earth of Rome from henceforth’.<sup>12</sup> There is probably less significance in the numerical correspondence between the ‘seven sacks’ of soil in the Life of Colmán Élo and the ‘load of seven men’ in that of Colmán mac Lúacháin, since the number was frequently used in Irish hagiography for quantities of time, people, and objects. It is notable, though, that Colmán Élo appears as a character in the Life of Colmán mac Lúacháin. Kuno Meyer observed that the latter’s hagiographer sought to associate him with more celebrated saints such as Colmán Élo and Colmán Comraire and, while not specifying any particular episode, suggested that the Life of Colmán mac Lúacháin might draw on those of his namesakes.<sup>13</sup> Following this logic, the author could have been aware of a Life of Colmán Élo that contained reference to the soil of Rome, as in the surviving Irish version. However, as things stand, the Life of Colmán mac Lúacháin is the more securely dated of the two Lives, and the possibility remains that it is the earlier.

Whatever the relationship between the Lives, the bringing of soil from Rome to cemetery sites is a wider trope of medieval and early modern Irish and Scottish

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<sup>9</sup> *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin*, 81, 85 (§77, 82).

<sup>10</sup> A single copy survives in a manuscript tentatively dated to the fourteenth or fifteenth century by the editor. *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin*, vi-vii; Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints’ Lives*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Pádraig Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 197.

<sup>12</sup> *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, 2: 167.

<sup>13</sup> *Betha Colmáin maic Luacháin*, xiii.

hagiography.<sup>14</sup> In all three of the Irish Lives of St Coemgen, the saint goes to ‘the court of Rome’ and brings back ‘wondrous earth’ to sprinkle on his cemeteries, receiving rights of pilgrimage such that seven visits to his fair were equal to visiting Rome.<sup>15</sup> In the Breviary of Aberdeen, printed in the early sixteenth century but drawing on earlier sources, St Lolan has four ass-loads of the soil of St Peter’s cemetery sent for the consecration of the cemetery in which he is to be buried, and prays that anyone buried there should receive the same indulgences as if he had been buried in St Peter’s cemetery.<sup>16</sup> In the Irish Life of St Molaise, dated to c.1500, the saint visits Rome and brings back to Devenish ‘a load of Rome’s soil’ as well as relics of the Roman martyrs and other saints.<sup>17</sup> The purpose is to save the Irish travelling to Rome other than in exceptional circumstances, but no reference is made to the specific destination of the earth and relics. However, while the reference to the soil is not found in the fourteenth-century Latin Life, here the relics of Peter, Paul, Laurence and Stephen are said to be placed in Molaise’s cemetery, ‘so that it should be considered in perpetuity as good as Rome itself by all choosing to be buried there’.<sup>18</sup> In all these cases, the transportation of Roman soil takes place at the instigation of the saint, whether as a result of his own journey to Rome or requested by him. For St Lolan it confirmed a personal association with St Peter’s, since he was understood to have acted as the claviger or doorkeeper of that church prior to his arrival in Scotland. Indeed, after the keys to St Peter’s had refused to open the doors without the hand of the saint, Lolan cut off his right hand and sent it to Rome, asking for the soil in exchange. The Life of Colmán Élo is unusual in

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<sup>14</sup> Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland: Architecture, Ritual and Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 83, 190.

<sup>15</sup> *Life of Coemgen II*, in *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, 2: 139 (§x) and also 155-6; see also *Life of Coemgen I*, in *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, 2: 121, 124 (§i, §xi); *Life of Coemgen III*, in *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, 2: 155-6 (§ix).

<sup>16</sup> *Legends of Scottish Saints: Readings, Hymns and Prayers for the Commemorations of Scottish Saints in the Aberdeen Breviary*, eds. Alan Macquarrie and Rachel Butter (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), 228-31. Some *lectiones* draw on *vitae* from the eleventh and twelfth centuries; Alan Macquarrie, ‘Lives of Scottish Saints in the Aberdeen Breviary: some problems of sources for Strathclyde saints’, *Scottish Church History Society* 26 (1996): 31-54.

<sup>17</sup> *Silva Gadelica: A Collection of Tales in Irish with Extracts Illustrating Persons and Places*, ed. Standish H. O’Grady, 2 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1892), 1: 32, 2: 29-30; for the dating, see Raymond Gillespie, ‘Saints and manuscripts in sixteenth-century Breifne’, *Breifne* 11, no. 44 (2008): 539-41. I am grateful to Professor Gillespie for sending me a copy of this work.

<sup>18</sup> *Vita sancti Lasriani seu Molaissi*, in *Vita sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Plummer, 2: 137: ‘ut omnibus ibidem sepulturam eligentibus pro Roma eisdem reputaretur in perpetuum.’



casting the soil as an unsolicited papal gift, although that of St Coemgen does imply a papal dimension to the soil in its reference to the 'court of Rome'.

How far then does this practice transcend hagiography? The references to Roman soil in the Lives have been associated with the fact that some Irish cemeteries were known as *rôm* or *rúam*. Charles Plummer and William Watson suggested that the bringing of earth from Rome led to the names.<sup>19</sup> However, the term may equally result from the presence of other Roman relics, which were both valued and understood to provide a connection with the city.<sup>20</sup> At Armagh, for instance, possession of such relics was part of a wider identification with Rome, which included Armagh's description as *urbs* and the dating of its foundation in relation to that of Rome.<sup>21</sup> Later scholarship has mainly treated the accounts as a hagiographical motif, although Richard Warner suggested that finds of *terra sigillata* pottery in various Irish sites should be understood in this context.<sup>22</sup> Yet, without adopting a literal reading of the Lives, they can still be seen to share features with the transfer of soil between burial places as this was imagined and experienced elsewhere in western Europe. The better known aspect of this phenomenon was focused on Jerusalem. From the late fourteenth century, cemeteries in Italy and elsewhere claimed to contain soil from Akeldama, the Potters' Field or Field of Blood bought by the chief priests with Judas' payment for betraying Christ and subsequently used as a burial place for pilgrims.<sup>23</sup> The Holy Land was also central to

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<sup>19</sup> Plummer, 'Preface', in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, 1: cx n. 7; W.J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1973), 257-8. A connection is also implied in C. Doherty, 'The use of relics in early Ireland', in *Irland und Europa: Die Kirche im Frühmittelalter*, eds. P. Ní Chatháin and M. Richter (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), 99; Dorothy Hoogland Verkerk, 'Pilgrimage *ad Limina Apostolorum* in Rome: Irish Crosses and Early Christian Sarcophagi', in *From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and its European Context*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 21.

<sup>20</sup> A general association with Roman relics is assumed in John Ryan, 'The Early Irish Church and the See of Peter', in *Le chiese nei regni dell'Europa occidentale e i loro rapporti con Roma sino all'800* (Spoleto: Presso la sede del Centro, 1960), 549-74, esp. 572. Niamh Wycherley also associates the term, attested from the ninth century, with both soil and other relics: Niamh Wycherley, *The Cult of Relics in Early Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 212.

<sup>21</sup> N.B. Aitchison, *Armagh and the Royal Centres in Early Medieval Ireland: Monuments, Cosmology, and the Past* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1994), 207-10, 274-6.

<sup>22</sup> Richard B. Warner, 'Some observations on the context and importation of exotic material in Ireland, from the first century BC to the second century AD', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 76 (1976): 285-8.

<sup>23</sup> Lucy Donkin, 'Earth from elsewhere: burial in *terra sancta* beyond the Holy Land', in *Natural Materials of the Holy Land and the Visual Translation of Place, 500-1500*, eds. Renana Bartel, Neta Bodner, and Bianca Kühnel (London: Routledge, 2017), 109-26; Neta Bodner, 'Earth from Jerusalem in

the claim made in the fourteenth-century *Cronica* of Glastonbury Abbey that the soil of its cemetery was so holy that those overseas requested some with which to be buried. A sultan was said to have welcomed a gloveful in the conviction, as in the Life of Colmán Éilo, that those buried there ‘will hardly suffer the pains of hell’.<sup>24</sup> However, Rome was another key point of reference, and one for which papal gifts are attested, showing the practices in the Irish Lives to be less particular than they can seem when discussed in isolation.

Beginning in the early sixteenth century, soil from the Campo Santo Teutonico next to St Peter’s in Rome was taken to be scattered over other cemeteries.<sup>25</sup> This burial place for German-speaking residents and pilgrims was one of those claimed to contain earth from Akeldama, but these associations appear to have been minimised in the distribution of its own soil. Early grants were made by Popes Julius II (1503-13) and Leo X (1513-21) to sites in today’s Austria, Germany, and Poland, along with indulgences equivalent to those of the Campo Santo, effectively allowing people to be buried at home as if they were in Rome. In the same period, soil from the grave of St Ursula in Cologne and the burial place of the 11,000 virgins was also venerated as a relic, being spread under the paving of a burial chapel in Hall in the Tyrol.<sup>26</sup> This may reflect Cologne’s status as a northern Rome, with a tradition of substituting for the holy city as a pilgrimage destination; already in the late fourteenth century, Boniface IX (1389-1404) had bestowed the Holy Year indulgence of 1390 on those visiting the churches of Cologne four years later.<sup>27</sup> In hagiographical sources, soil from Cologne might even be validated by being taken to Rome. In the early sixteenth-century Life of St Irmgard of Cologne, the saint, asked by the pope for a relic, took him a handkerchief

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the Pisan Camposanto’, in *Between Jerusalem and Europe: Essays in Honour of Bianca Kühnel*, eds. Renana Bartal and Hanna Vorholt (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 74-93.

<sup>24</sup> *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, ed. James P. Carley, trans. David Townsend (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1985), lviii, 32-5.

<sup>25</sup> Donkin, ‘Earth from elsewhere’; Anja A. Tietz, *Der frühneuzeitliche Gottesacker: Entstehung und Entwicklung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Architekturtypus Camposanto in Mitteldeutschland* (Halle: Landesamt für Denkmalpflege und Archäologie Sachsen-Anhalt, 2012), esp. 31, 34-8.

<sup>26</sup> Josef Garber, ‘Das Haller Heiltumbuch mit den Unika-Holzschnitten Hans Burkmairs des Älteren’, *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Kaiserhauses* 32, no. 6 (1915): LXXV, CLXXII.

<sup>27</sup> Diana Webb, ‘Pardons and Pilgrims’, in *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merits: Indulgences in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. R.W. Swanson (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 256.

of soil from the ‘kirchof’ in which the virgins were buried.<sup>28</sup> The soil of both places could be credited with corporeal connotations. A fifteenth-century German version of the *Mirabilia Romae* noted that the earth of Rome was sacred on account of the blood of the martyrs shed there.<sup>29</sup> When Irmgard’s handkerchief was unwrapped by the pope, it was found to be full of blood, confirming its connection to the martyred virgins.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, an account of the remissorial trial of Pope Pius V (1566-72) in 1597 relates that the pope, asked by a Polish legate for a relic with which to return to Poland, gave him a handkerchief of soil from St Peter’s Square.<sup>31</sup> Described as full of the blood of the martyrs, it too bled to demonstrate its authenticity. The later medieval and early modern insular Lives therefore date from a period in which Roman soil and indulgences were indeed being granted as papal gifts, and soil from places associated with martyrs was valued more widely. The kind of spatial relationship established, in which the soil facilitated a degree of equivalence with Rome and removed the need to travel there, is also found elsewhere, though perhaps being transcended when sites generated holy soil of their own. Yet while the insular Lives do exhibit an interest in the graves of particular saints, including key Roman martyrs as well as Pope Gregory the Great, they do not include the leitmotif of the bleeding earth. Overall, the soil substitutes more for a location than for a body. It does so in ways that correspond to wider attitudes to both sacred space and the material itself.

If the transportation of the Roman soil created a relationship between distant places, its disposition on the cemeteries defined sacred space on a smaller scale. Details exhibit a concern with the totality of the area. In the Life of Colmán mac Lúacháin the soil is scattered ‘in every direction’; in that of Colmán Élo, shaken ‘over the length and breadth’ of the cemetery, perhaps implying a cruciform marking of the site. It is not clear whether this was envisaged as a formal ritual; only in the Life of St Lolan is the

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<sup>28</sup> The legend, printed in 1523, is reproduced and discussed in Manfred Beck, *Untersuchungen zur geistliche Literatur im Kölner Druck des Frühen 16. Jahrhunderts* (Göppingen: Verlag Alfred Kummerle, 1977), 148-9, 174-5.

<sup>29</sup> Nine Miedema, *Die “Mirabilia Romae”: Untersuchungen zu ihrer Überlieferung mit Edition der deutschen und niederländischen Texte* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1996), 345.

<sup>30</sup> Beck, *Untersuchungen zur geistliche Literatur*, 148-9, 174-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Acta Sanctorum Maii I* (Antwerp, 1680), 715E; Simon Ditchfield, ‘Text before trowel: Antonio Bosio’s *Roma Sotterranea* revisited’, in *The Church Retrospective*, ed. R.W. Swanson (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997), 343. Ditchfield notes that this trial was the second stage in the judicial process of canonisation; Pius was finally canonised in 1712.

soil explicitly related to the consecration of the cemetery, while in that of Colmán mac Lúacháin the cemetery had already been consecrated.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, the form is still likely to draw on rites for the consecration of both cemeteries and church buildings. Most obviously it echoes the sprinkling of holy water on the ground, but it also displays correspondences with other markings and processional routes. Although there is little liturgical evidence surviving from medieval Ireland, Irish origins have been proposed for practices carried out more widely. Anglo-Saxon rites for consecrating cemeteries, seen to have drawn on Irish traditions of bounded sacred space, involved one procession around the site sprinkling holy water and a second during which prayers were said at the four sides, traversing the area in the form of a cross.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, from the ninth century, the consecration of a church commonly involved the lustration of the floor in the form of a Latin cross (*in longum et in latum*), as well as the writing of two alphabets on the ground in the form of a diagonal cross.<sup>34</sup> From at least the early eleventh century, these were inscribed in ashes or sand.<sup>35</sup> Although the earliest surviving Irish testimony is found in the *Leabhar Breac* tractate on the dedication, which probably dates from the eleventh century, it is possible that the *abecedarium* was of Irish origin.<sup>36</sup> The earliest known diagram of the consecration rite is found in a ninth-century manuscript from Brittany with Breton glosses that have been compared to Old Irish commentaries and a marginal commentary deriving from an Irish treatise on *computus*.<sup>37</sup> It is therefore

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<sup>32</sup> *Betha Colmáin maic Luacháin*, 31, 41 (§31, 42).

<sup>33</sup> Helen Gittos, 'Creating the sacred: Anglo-Saxon rites for consecrating cemeteries', in *Burial in Early Medieval England and Wales*, eds. Sam Lucy and Andrew Reynolds (London: Society for Early Medieval Archaeology, 2002), 195-208, esp. 195-6, 205-7; Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*, 83.

<sup>34</sup> *Ordo Romanus XLI*, 5, 14, ed. Michel Andrieu, *Les Ordines Romani du Haut Moyen Age*, 5 vols. (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1931-61), 4: 319, 340-3.

<sup>35</sup> Lucy Donkin, 'Making an impression: consecration and the creation of architectural memory', in *Romanesque and the Past: Retrospection in the Art and Architecture of Romanesque Europe*, eds. John McNeill and Richard Plant (Leeds: Maney, 2013), 37-48, esp. 37-9.

<sup>36</sup> *Leabhar Breac Tractate*, ed. W. Stokes, 'The Lebar Brecc tractate on the consecration of a church', *Miscellanea Linguistica in onore di Graziadio Ascoli* (Turin: E. Loescher, 1901), 363-85, esp. 379-81 (§32). The tractate survives only in an early fifteenth-century manuscript but was dated to the eleventh century by the editor on linguistic grounds. On account of a lacuna, the description of the cruciform lustration is missing. On the *abecedarium*, see Andrieu, *Ordines Romani*, 4: 319; H. Thurston, 'The Alphabet and the Consecration of Churches', *The Month* (1910): 621-31.

<sup>37</sup> Angers, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 477 (461), fol. 9r; Dominique Barbet-Massin, 'Le rituel irlandais de consécration des églises au Moyen Âges: le témoignage des sources irlandaises et bretonnes', *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest* 118, no. 2 (2011): 7-39.

possible that the way in which the soil is used in the two Lives speaks to indigenous traditions of sacred space, as well as more common elements of consecration ritual.

As far as I am aware, there is no liturgical text that prescribes the scattering of anything other than holy water during the rite for consecrating a cemetery. However, some thought was given to the movement of soil into consecrated ground. In the thirteenth century, Gerard d'Abbeville (d. 1272) asked whether the use of unblessed earth to supplement that in an existing cemetery necessitated the re-consecration of the space.<sup>38</sup> The decision that this was not necessary, on the grounds that the more worthy drew the less worthy to itself, speaks of relative sanctity in a way that holds true where the more meaningful soil was that added to an existing site. A little Roman soil thus had the potential to effect a transformation of space. At the same time, its capacity to remain Roman should also be set within a tradition in geographical writing in which earth maintained its properties when taken elsewhere. Claims that some soil was fatal to poisonous animals had been made for various islands since antiquity, but the idea was particularly developed with regard to Ireland.<sup>39</sup> Solinus (*fl.* probably third century), followed by Isidore (c.560-636), stated that there were no bees in Ireland and when Irish dust and pebbles were spread among beehives in other lands, the bees would abandon their combs.<sup>40</sup> In his *Topographia Hiberniae*, Gerald of Wales (d. c.1223) attributed the lack of venomous animals in Ireland in part to 'some occult property of the soil itself' and noted that dust from the island sprinkled on the ground elsewhere retained this property.<sup>41</sup> Although in ideas of geographical determinism, objects removed from their natural location often lost their efficacy, earth itself, as one of the determining factors of locality, seems to have been able to retain its properties. The role of the Roman soil in Irish hagiography may well reflect the powers credited to Irish soil. However, it does not function in exactly the same way. On the one hand, its salvific efficacy depends on its relocation being sanctioned; Colmán mac Lúacháin denies the efficacy of the stolen

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<sup>38</sup> Michel Lauwers, *La naissance du cimetière: Lieux sacrés et terre des morts dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris: Aubier, 2005), 191-2.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Freeman, *Ireland and the Classical World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 87-8.

<sup>40</sup> Solinus, *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, 22, ed. T. Mommsen (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895), 100; Isidore, *Etymologiae*, 14.6.6; trans. S.A. Barney et al, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 294.

<sup>41</sup> Gerald of Wales, *Topographia Hiberniae*, in *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. J.S. Brewer et al., 8 vols. Rolls Series 21 (London: Longman, 1867), 5: 62-4 (c.28-30); *The Historical Works of Giraldus Cambrensis*, trans. Thomas Forrester (London: George Bell, 1894), 47-50.

soil away from Lann. On the other hand, its powers could be transferred; the family of Durrow only succeed in stealing soil from outside the cemetery, but Colmán Élo prays that it might have ‘the virtue of the earth of Rome’. The soil is valued for its Roman origins and retains this identity elsewhere, but can also be understood to transform its new location through its relative sanctity, ritually informed dispersal, and status as a papal gift.

### **Roman Sound**

As noted above, in the Life of Colmán Élo, the arrival of the soil takes place while Gregory’s passing bell is heard. Like the soil, the role of sound in connecting places has parallels in both imagined and experienced practices, in Ireland and beyond. Yet where the gift of soil (however conveniently timed) does not itself transcend physical possibility, the audibility of the bell is clearly miraculous. Moreover, where soil is naturally redolent of place and requires deliberate transportation to link locations, bells are inherently communicatory and through this define both spaces and communities. In the words of Caroline Goodson and John Arnold, the suspended bell ‘sits at the epicenter of a potentially circular sound-field, the borders of which might be imagined as roughly corresponding to the social unit to which it belongs’.<sup>42</sup> Although they describe this as an ideal type and go on to demonstrate a more complex and contested reality, the idea of the sound-field is a useful way to approach the role of the bell in the Life of St Colmán Élo. Where the passing bell of Gregory the Great might be expected to signal his death to the curia and the city of Rome, here the sound-field is miraculously extended to the limits of Latin Christendom.

Miraculous bells, and especially bells that ring by themselves, are a common hagiographical topos, and Roman examples can be found in writing stemming from the city and elsewhere. They often demonstrate saintly status, most frequently on the death of the saint. For example, an account of Pope Leo IX’s death in 1054 by the subdeacon Libuinus states that the bells of St Peter’s rang by themselves.<sup>43</sup> Bells could also

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<sup>42</sup> Caroline Goodson and John Arnold, ‘Resounding community: the history and meaning of medieval church bells’, *Viator* 43, no. 1 (2012): 99-130, esp. 124.

<sup>43</sup> Libuinus, *Historia mortis et miraculorum seu De obitu Leonis IX*, in *Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina*, ed. J.P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris, 1841-64), 143: 531; Sible de Blaauw, ‘*Campanae supra urbem*. Sull’uso delle campane nella Roma medievale’, *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa* 47 (1993): 386.

acknowledge the presence of a saint in a significant place. In the Life of Maedoc of Ferns, when he and his companions arrived at Rome, all the bells started to ring of their own accord.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in the Life of St Irmgard of Cologne, all the bells of Rome, great and small, rang when she reached the gates of the city.<sup>45</sup> The saint had with her the soil from the churchyard in which the Cologne virgins were buried, and it was this, as much as Irmgard herself, which the sound of the bells acknowledged. In Roman hagiography, a specific church and area might act in this way, as when the remains of Margarita Colonna (d. 1280) were translated from Palestrina and the bells of S. Silvestro in Capite rang by themselves when they entered the Colonna district of the city.<sup>46</sup> However, in the case of the transalpine saints, it is the city as a whole that was important and all its bells that were involved. Indeed, where places had a tradition of standing in for Rome, the validation of their own saints there may have been commensurately important.

In the Irish Life of Colmán Élo the miraculous quality of the bell is not that it is ringing, but rather that it can be heard in distant Ireland. The limits of the sound-field of the city of Rome are temporarily coterminous with the outer reaches of Latin Christendom and papal authority. Yet the miracle does not generally widen the auditory field, but does so selectively, giving the Irish listeners – first the saint himself and then his companions – privileged access to a distant soundscape. A precedent for this exclusive Rome-focused cliraudience can be found in the eighth-century Life of St Brigit, in which she could hear masses at the tombs of Sts Peter and Paul.<sup>47</sup> The episode is tied to observance of the Roman rite. Not only did the saint send for the liturgical books in order to follow the correct procedure, but after she detected that changes had been made, she requested the revised versions. In this way, Brigit's miraculous auditory participation in the masses brings about another kind of synchronicity, more widely shared, in which the celebration of the mass in Ireland corresponded to that at the shrines of the saints in Rome. In both cases, virtual access to Rome is mediated by the

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<sup>44</sup> *Bethada Náem nÉirenn*, 2: 194-5.

<sup>45</sup> Beck, *Untersuchungen zur geistliche Literatur*, 148-9, 174-5.

<sup>46</sup> *Historia della B. Margarita vergine Romana*, in *Historia delle sante virgini romane*, ed. A. Gallonio (Rome, 1571), 338.

<sup>47</sup> *Vita Prima Sanctae Brigitae*, trans. Seán Connolly, in Connolly, 'Vita prima sanctae Brigitae: background and historical value', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 119 (1989): 41 (§90). The episode is discussed in Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *The City of Rome and the World of Bede* (Jarrow: Parish of Jarrow, 1995), 1-2.

Irish saints. Although the group around Colmán Élo participates in the miracle too, comparisons can be drawn between his reception of the Roman soil and Brigit's acquisition of the Roman books; both offer a shared, lasting, and materially facilitated connection with Rome and its saints, that in some way extended an aspect of the city.

Clairaudience as found in the Lives of St Colmán Élo and St Brigit was related to visionary experiences, sometimes described as clairvoyant, in which saints saw an event taking place some distance away at the very moment it happened. The veracity of the vision was often confirmed at a later date by travellers from that place, and the scale of the distance overcome tended to reflect the horizons and preoccupations of the saint and community concerned. Thus the Life of the blessed Giradus, a monk at Saint-Aubain in Angers, describes him seeing the death of a knight in a nearby castle, expressing local landholding conflicts in which his family and the monks were involved.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, the twelfth-century hermit Godric of Finchdale, himself a former sailor and Jerusalem pilgrim, frequently saw ships in peril at sea as well as the city of Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup> The importance of Rome to the Irish is reflected in several visions of this kind, including that of St Columba, who in Adomnán's Life of the saint saw a town near Rome swamped by sulphurous fire.<sup>50</sup> Although less tied to a particular moment, in the Life of St Berach, his pupil Colman Cáel wishes to go to Rome but is vouchsafed a vision of the city instead, while in the Life of Colmán mac Lúacháin, the walls of Rome appear to the travellers while they are still in the Alps.<sup>51</sup> The moment of someone's death was also communicated in this way, as in the Latin Life of Colmán Élo, where the saint has a vision of Gregory's soul ascending to heaven.<sup>52</sup>

The sound of Gregory's passing bell in the Irish Life of Colmán Élo is similar in focus to the vision of his death in the Latin Life. However, where the vision is experienced individually and then shared verbally with his companions, as noted above the bell effects a more directly communal experience. Although the bell is initially only

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<sup>48</sup> Belle Stoddard Tuten, 'Politics, holiness and property in Angers, 1080-1130', *French Historical Studies* 24, no. 4 (2001): 617.

<sup>49</sup> Reginald of Durham, *Libellus de Vita et Miraculis S. Godrici, Heremitaie de Finchdale*, ed. Joseph Stevenson (London: Surtees Society, 1847), 130-1 (c.56); Monika Otter, 'Godric of Finchdale's *Canora Modulatio*: the auditory and visionary worlds of a twelfth-century hermit', *The Haskins Society Journal* 24 (2012): 135-6.

<sup>50</sup> Adomnán, *Vita sancti Columbae*, 22.

<sup>51</sup> *Life of Berach*, in *Bethada Náem nÉirenn*, 2: 41-2 (§xxx); *Betha Colmáin maic Luacháin*, 79 (§76).

<sup>52</sup> *Vita S. Colmani de Land Elo*, 215-16 (§20); *Vita Sancti Colmani*, 1: 264 (§15).



audible to the saint himself, after he has instructed the sizeable assembled company to kneel, ‘there was not a single man among them at that time who did not hear the bells of Rome’.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, while the individual vision is only later confirmed by travellers, the bells herald the arrival of emissaries from Rome, bringing the gift of earth which gives those buried in the cemetery virtual access to the city. The spatial dimension of the miracles is also different. As Monika Otter has noted, Godric’s visions ‘function horizontally, overcoming and integrating vast geographical spaces; whereas his auditory feats ... perform a vertical integration, connecting him directly to the saints in heaven’.<sup>54</sup> In the Lives of Colmán Élo, the opposite is true, so that where the vision in the Latin Life is heaven-facing, in the Irish Life sound combines with matter to make Rome present in Ireland. Finally, what is seen and heard involves communication differently. While the vision of death or entry into heaven was miraculous in communicating that an event was taking place, those hearing the passing bell were participating in what was already an act of communication; the miracle lay in extending the intrinsic nature of the sound. As such, this can also be distinguished from the situation in the Life of St Brigit, in which the saint effectively listens in to an act of worship. At the same time, in its geographical reach, it is also suggestive of the potential for bells to be employed in ways that transcended their immediate sound-field.

The bells of Rome could correspond with those of Christendom more widely, creating a combined sound-field. From the 1240s it was customary for church bells to ring during mass, at the point when prayers were said for the Crusades.<sup>55</sup> As set out in a letter of 1252 from Pope Innocent IV (1243-54), the rationale was to prompt those outside the church to participate in the prayers as well, conceptually at least reaching ‘the whole of Christian society’.<sup>56</sup> This invoked two spatial extremes: on the one hand, the sound-field of an individual pair of bells; on the other, all Latin Christendom centred on Rome, or rather that Rome which attended the person of the pope since the letter was written in Perugia. Pope, letter, and bells form a chain of verbal and sonic communication that ultimately returns to the human voice in the form of the *Pater*

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<sup>53</sup> *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, 2: 166.

<sup>54</sup> Otter, ‘Godric of Finchdale’s *Canora Modulatio*’, 135.

<sup>55</sup> Christoph T. Maier, ‘Crisis, liturgy and the crusade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 48, no. 4 (1997): 635.

<sup>56</sup> Maier, ‘Crisis, liturgy and the crusade’, 635 for the quotation; *Foedera, conventiones, literae*, ed. T. Rymer et al (The Hague: Apud Joannem Neulme, 1745), 1: 170-1.

*noster* and other prayers to be spoken by those who heard the bells, prayers directed at a heavenly recipient. However, the sound of the bells is not restricted to relaying the papal prompt to distant communities, but is also present at the origin of the message and centre of the space, since the bells of Rome and Perugia were presumably envisaged as ringing too. Within this framework, the realities of papal communication involved regional intermediaries; the letter recorded in Rymer's *Foedera* was addressed to the bishops of England, Ireland and Wales. Although the point and poignancy of the bell ringing was the participation of the universal Church, from the point of view of the recipients, such a letter joined them in a particular relationship with the centre. There was therefore a chain of communication in which a papal command in Italy could translate into the pealing of bells in Ireland, and in which those bells might be understood to sound together with bells in Rome. This does not mirror the situation in the Life of Colmán Élo either in the reach or role of the bells, nor am I suggesting this papal command as a source of inspiration. Yet it does suggest one way in which the miraculous might draw on elements of the experienced, beyond the phenomenon of the passing bell itself. It also indicates that some of the power of the miracle lay in eliminating intermediaries to bring about a direct auditory engagement with Rome.

The importance given to the bell in the account is likely to reflect a specifically Irish interest. In this period, Rome partook in the campanological conventions of western Europe. From the late eleventh century to the early thirteenth campaniles were constructed at a large number of churches.<sup>57</sup> The most prominent churches, including St Peter's, the Lateran, and S. Maria Maggiore, possessed a number of bells, some papal gifts, all of which would be used on major festivities.<sup>58</sup> The sheer concentration of churches in the city must have led to an intense sound at times. Nevertheless, bells do not seem to be a distinctive feature of Rome as the city was described or imagined in the Middle Ages. In contrast, bells did have wider importance in medieval Irish religious culture. As elsewhere, they were rung to mark time and communicate with members of a community, including to signal a death.<sup>59</sup> They could be rung from prominent towers

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<sup>57</sup> Neil Christie, 'On bells and bell-towers: origins and evolutions in Italy and Britain, AD 700-1200', *Church Archaeology* 5-6 (2004): 13-30, esp. 19-20; Ann Priester, 'Bell towers and building workshops in medieval Rome', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 52, no. 2 (1993): 199-220.

<sup>58</sup> de Blaauw, '*Campanae supra urbem*', 377-81, 388.

<sup>59</sup> Cormac Bourke, 'Insigniae Columbae II', in *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba*, ed. Cormac Bourke (Dublin and Portland, Oregon: Four Courts Press, 1997), 162-83, esp. 162-73; Karen Eileen Overbey,

that dominated the surrounding landscape.<sup>60</sup> They were also associated with individual churchmen, enclosed in graves, venerated as relics, and enshrined in reliquaries. In a hagiographical context, the ringing of such a bell took on particular significance, with the potential to create a ‘relationship between the voice of the bell and the voice of the saint’.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, Karen Overbey has noted that bells are more associated than other holy objects with institutional concerns, especially the establishment or protection of ecclesiastical space.<sup>62</sup> In a number of saints’ lives, their bells ring autonomously to indicate divine approval for the location of new foundations. Rung by the saint, a bell might fulfil an apotropaic function, warding off human and supernatural enemies from monastic lands. Although the sound of the passing bell in the Life of Colmán Élo is remarkable for its range and the bell does not feature as a material object, the association of bells with prominent Irish saints may have informed its connection with Gregory, including ringing at the same time as his human messengers gave voice to his instructions. Similarly, it may be that their supernatural role in the definition of sacred space encouraged that of the bell in transporting Gregory’s Rome to Ireland. Like the scattered soil then, the bell had particular associations in Ireland, while also demonstrating correspondences with practices in Rome and elsewhere. Together they authenticate and complement each other to render Rome virtually present, the ephemeral ringing of the bell being perpetuated by the earth that creates a lasting material equivalency between the two places.

## Conclusion

In this episode of miraculous communication, soil and sound combine to elide two places or eclipse the distance between them. This is given particular significance by Ireland’s position at the very edge of the world in both classical and medieval geographical thought, in contrast to Rome’s centrality. Figures such as St Patrick and St Columbanus had presented this positively, understanding the conversion of the Irish as

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*Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines, and Territory in Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 115-45.

<sup>60</sup> On Irish bell-towers see Roger Stalley, ‘Sex, symbol, and myth: some observations on the Irish round towers’, in *From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and its European Context*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 27-47.

<sup>61</sup> Overbey, *Sacral Geographies*, 127.

<sup>62</sup> Overbey, *Sacral Geographies*, 126-8.

fulfilling prophecies that salvation would reach the ends of the earth and stressing their orthodoxy.<sup>63</sup> There were also more negative readings of Ireland's remoteness, which presented its inhabitants as unorthodox or barbaric.<sup>64</sup> The miracle represents a different response again. It acknowledges Ireland's position precisely by transcending it, uniting centre and periphery to present a specially privileged relationship with Rome that negates the space in between. The Rome thus conjured up is also a particular one. The picture of the city given in the Life of Colmán Élo, and in the other Irish and Scottish lives, presents it as a place of salvation, the burial site of Roman martyrs and other saints. Although there is reference to the 'court of Rome' and St Lolan holds the office of claviger or doorkeeper at St Peter's, there is little sense of the city as home to the institution of the papacy. Instead, the lives engage with the papacy, or rather with individual popes, where these intersected with the cult of saints, in the form of St Peter and, more specifically, Gregory the Great. In the Life of Colmán mac Lúacháin soil is brought from Gregory's grave. In the Irish Life of Colmán Élo, Gregory's gift and passing bell combine to confirm a personal bond between the pope and his Irish contemporary.

These instances are part of a wider phenomenon in which Irish saints were connected with Gregory the Great, and ultimately the pope himself was claimed to be of Irish descent.<sup>65</sup> Miraculous communication played an important part in this connection. As mentioned above, in the Latin Life of Colmán Élo, the saint sees Gregory's soul being taken to heaven. The Irish Life of Gregory also has Colmán Élo witness this.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Jennifer O'Reilly, 'Islands and idols at the ends of the earth: exegesis and conversion in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*', in *Bede le venerable entre tradition et postérité / The Venerable Bede: Tradition and Posterity*, eds. Stéphane Lebecq, Michel Perrin, and Olivier Szerwiniack (Lille: Université Charles-de-Gaulle-Lille 3, 2004), 119-45, esp. 121-4; see also Lucy Donkin, 'Usque ad ultimum terrae: mapping the ends of the earth in two medieval floor mosaics', in *Cartography in the Middle Ages and Antiquity: Fresh Perspectives, New Methods*, eds. Richard J.A. Talbot and Richard W. Unger (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 189-217, esp. 192-201.

<sup>64</sup> O'Reilly, 'Islands and idols', 144-5; Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000-1534* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 46-70.

<sup>65</sup> François Kerlouégan, 'Grégoire le Grand et les Pays Celtiques', in *Grégoire le Grande*, eds. J. Fontaine, R. Gillet and S. Pellistrandi (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1986), 589-96; Máire Herbert, 'The representation of Gregory the Great in Irish sources of the pre-Viking era', in *Listen, O Isles, Unto Me: Studies in Medieval Word and Image in Honour of Jennifer O'Reilly*, eds. Elizabeth Mullins and Diarmuid Scully (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 181-90.

<sup>66</sup> *Betha Grigora*, ed. and trans. J. Vendryes, 'Betha Grigora', *Revue Celtique* 42 (1925): 145 (c.15). Preserved in manuscripts from the end of the fourteenth century on, this *Life* has been dated on linguistic

Such communication could work both ways: in the Latin Life of St Molua, the saint miraculously shared Gregory's emotions on refusing and subsequently accepting the papacy, while the pope heard the heavenly choirs at Molua's death.<sup>67</sup> Connections were also expressed through reciprocal gift-giving, particularly in relation to Gregory's contemporary St Columba. The tenth- or eleventh-century preface to *Altus Prosator* states that the hymn was sent to Gregory by Columba, who received a book of hymns and a jewelled cross in return.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, an account of the death of the king of Leinster, dated linguistically to the eleventh or twelfth century, recounts a heavenly battle in which Columba dropped his stylus over Rome and this was picked up by Gregory the Great.<sup>69</sup> After Columba had spent some time with the pope, he returned home with Gregory's broach. Perhaps the most developed expression of the links between Gregory and Ireland was the claim that the pope was of Irish descent, and had visited the island and expressed the desire to be buried there, the Irish equivalent of the sultan's request for the Glastonbury soil. This wish was fulfilled after his death, when his coffin, placed in the Tiber, miraculously found its own way to the Aran Islands.<sup>70</sup> Both the gift of soil and the sound of the passing bell thus fit into a wider interest in Pope Gregory the Great in Irish hagiography, which encompassed the material and the visionary, and also involved an element of appropriation.

What does this imply for the picture of papal communication presented in the Irish Life of Colmán Élo? If the means through which Rome and Ireland are brought into contact therein can be compared to a self-navigating coffin, do they really have anything to tell us about the world of letters and legates? On the one hand, the two media involved have an intrinsic potential to transcend place; if sound naturally carries, soil possesses the capacity to translate aspects of its original location. The miraculous elements of the Life extend and harness these properties rather than inventing them. As a result, while the choice of soil and bell likely reflect the significance given to both in

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evidence to no later than the mid-twelfth century: Herbert, 'The representation of Gregory the Great', 185.

<sup>67</sup> *Vita Prior S. Lugidi seu Moluae abbatis de Cluain Ferta Molua*, in *Vita Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Heist, 131-45, 141, 145 (§47, 69).

<sup>68</sup> Ragnall Ó Floinn, 'Insignia Columbae I', in *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba*, ed. Cormac Bourke (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 154-5; Cormac Bourke, 'A note on the *Delg Aidechta*', in *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba*, 184-92.

<sup>69</sup> Bourke, 'A note on the *Delg Aidechta*', 184.

<sup>70</sup> *Betha Grigora*, 145 (c.15).

Ireland, these means of overcoming distance had parallels elsewhere in Latin Christendom, including in Rome, and could be employed in practice. Later popes did indeed send Roman soil to be spread on cemeteries, and issued commands that led to the sound of bells in Ireland. Not only does hagiography thus draw attention to less commonly discussed methods of papal communication, but bringing together the imagined and the experienced allows patterns to emerge within this combined material. In particular, several regions sought a privileged relationship with a sacred location through the transfer of soil, achieving an equivalency of place. On the other hand, the Life of Colmán Élo can also be seen to illuminate practices of communication by presenting their opposite. If the passing bell cuts out stages in the chain of oral and written communication implied by Innocent's letter, the episode as a whole offers a stronger contrast with normal practice. In fact, papal communication was slow, mediated, and often reactive. Even for those who made the long journey to Rome, access to the pope was circumscribed by curial procedure and personnel.<sup>71</sup> In presenting instant, direct, exclusive, and personal contact with the pope, even through a gift and news of his death, the miracle experienced by the saint and his companions transcended custom as well as nature. Ultimately, a miracle of papal communication was compelling for what it offered that reality did not.

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### **Note on contributor**

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<sup>71</sup> See Iben Fonnesberg-Schmidt, 'Visitor Experiences: Art, Architecture, and Space at the Papal Curia c.1200' in this volume.

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